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## LBJ Shown as Crazy, but No Liar

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A comparison of the Johnson administration's public remarks with the material that has been published from the Pentagon's private study of the Vietnam war discloses a public record marked by half-truths, careful ambiguities, and misleading and deceptive statements rather than flatfooted untruths.

What appears at first glance to be the grossest misstatement in public frequently turns out, on close examination, to contain a phrase or word that saves it from the label "lie."

For example, on April 1, 1965, according to the published documents, President Johnson secretly made a fateful decision, ordering the 3,500 Marines in Vietnam to shift from a static defense of the base at Danang to offensive actions. This was the beginning of an offensive combat role for U.S. ground troops.

The first public hint of this change came on June 8 when a State Department spokesman said that "American forces would be available for combat support." The next day, the White House put out a statement asserting:

"There has been no change in the mission of United States ground combat units in Vietnam in recent days or weeks. The President has issued no order of any kind in this regard to Gen. Westmoreland recently or at any other time."

This appears to be the lie direct. But the statement continued:

"The primary mission of these troops is to secure and safeguard important military installations like the airbase at Danang. They have the associated mission of actively patrolling and securing action in and near the areas thus safeguarded."

"If help is requested by appropriate Vietnamese commanders, Gen. Westmoreland also has authority within the assigned mission to employ these troops in support of Vietnamese

## News Analysis

forces faced with aggressive attack..."

Thus, the last two paragraphs, although still avoiding the full truth, soften the impact of the first and patently false paragraph.

Again in late November 1964 the Administration's top-most circle, according to published material, agreed to adopt a "determined action program" aimed at putting pressure on Hanoi and raising South Vietnamese morale. A draft position paper of Nov. 29 charts a two-phase bombing program as a key element in this plan—possible reprisal strikes against North Vietnam and a U.S. readiness to conduct sustained bombing against the North.

At a press conference on Nov. 28, a prescient reporter asked the President:

"Is expansion of the Vietnam war into Laos or North Vietnam a live possibility at this point?"

Mr. Johnson, in a lengthy reply, allowed that his top advisers were then meeting, but in the operative part of his response said:

"I anticipate that there will be no dramatic announcement (emphasis added) to come out of these meetings except in the form of your speculation."

This was literally true but substantively misleading. No dramatic announcement was made but the meetings all but sealed the dramatic decision to launch the two-phase bombing program that began in February.

Administration leaders rarely made outright misstatements about the crucial events in the 20 months up to July 1965 when, as the already published Pentagon documents say, the United States entered into an open-ended commitment and an Asian land war.

Perhaps Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara came as close as any to complete falsification in his testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee

in February, 1968.

The Committee was exploring the origins of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, the authority on which the Johnson regime relied to enlarge the war. Sen. William Fulbright (D-Ark.), the chairman, was attempting to discover whether the administration had decided well in advance of the August incidents in the Tonkin Gulf to ask Congress for a broad grant of authority. The dialogue went like this:

The Chairman: Mr. Secretary did you see the contingency draft of what became the Southeast Asia resolution before it was ready?

Secretary McNamara: Mr. Chairman, I read in the newspaper a few weeks ago there had been such a contingency draft. I don't believe I ever saw it... But I can't testify absolutely that I didn't. My memory is not clear on that.

## Executive Committee

In fact, the Executive Committee of the National Security Council — which included McNamara — had decided after its meetings on May 24 and 25, 1964 to seek a Congressional resolution authorizing "all measures" to assist South Vietnam. Thus, McNamara and the others had approved a draft of the Tonkin Gulf resolution nearly ten weeks before the attack on the American destroyers in those waters.

Even here, McNamara's choice of words to the Senate Committee is artful. He says he didn't believe he saw the draft and it is conceivable that he approved the substance without reading all the language. Moreover, he tells the committee that his memory isn't clear on the crucial point and he won't "absolutely" deny having seen it.

At the same hearing, Gen. Earle Wheeler, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, skirted perilously close to untruth. Whether he avoided it is an exercise in higher semantics.

Chairman Fulbright asked Wheeler whether in the period around July 1964 the military had recommended extending the war to the north by bombing or other means.

Gen. Wheeler replied: "I don't believe so, Mr. Chairman. I think that the proper answer would be that there were certain intelligence activities (deleted) but to the best of my knowledge and belief during that period there was no thought of extending the war into the North in the sense of our participation in such actions, activities."

Then, for the record, the Pentagon supplied an insertion:

"We have identified no such recommendation. A check of the records of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is continuing."

In fact, published records show, as early as Jan. 22, 1964 — six months before the period about which Fulbright was inquiring — the top brass sent McNamara a lengthy memo saying:

"Accordingly, the Joint Chiefs of Staff consider that the United States must make ready to conduct increasingly bolder actions in Southeast Asia to:

"... h. Conduct aerial bombing of key North Vietnam targets, using U.S. resources under Vietnamese cover, and with the Vietnamese openly assuming responsibility for the actions."

"j. Commit U.S. forces as necessary in direct actions against North Vietnam..."

Wheeler was stretching the truth to say the Chiefs harbored "no thought" of extending the war North. On the other hand, he could argue that a proposal "to make ready" northward actions is less than a recommendation and that he equates "thought" with an unqualified proposal.

The gap between public oratory and private belief is strikingly illustrated by Mr. Johnson's State of the Union address, 1965.

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